
ABRAHAM GROESBECK HOUSE

1304 West Washington Boulevard
Chicago, Illinois

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DATE: 1869

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The red brick residence at 1304 West Washington Street is a significant survivor. Erected in 1869, this home and office of noted early Chicago physician Dr. Abraham Groesbeck escaped the Chicago Fire of 1871. In the decades just before and after the Civil War, grand mansions lined fashionable streets such as Washington, Jackson, and Ashland. This elegantly simple Italianate structure is one of the few remaining remnants from the city's early history when the Near West Side was an exclusive residential district. Its state of preservation, both inside and out, is remarkable for such a vintage building.

Dr. Groesbeck and the Early Chicago Medical Community

Biographical data on Abraham Groesbeck can be found in Charles D. Mosher's 1876 *Centennial Historical Album of Chicago Physicians* and in A. T. Andreas' 1885 *History of Chicago*. Dr. Groesbeck was born on May 24, 1810, in Albany, New York, and given a classical education at the Albany Academy. He left school at the age of fifteen to study medicine under the tutelage of one Dr. Jonathan Eights for whom he had already been working in his out-of-school hours. He became Dr. Eights's partner for five years after receiving his license from the New York Medical Society on May 24, 1831.

In 1832, he attended the first case of cholera in Albany and, during the epidemic that followed, was in charge of the Cholera Hospital. Undoubtedly able, he was subsequently appointed physician to the Alms House in Albany. More public recognition was accorded to Dr. Groesbeck when the Albany Medical College conferred an honorary degree on him upon the establishment of that institution in 1848. For a brief time he abandoned medicine and experimented with agriculture, buying a farm in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Dr. Groesbeck came to Chicago in 1856 with his wife Mary Williams, whom he had married in 1841, and their two children. Indicative of their social standing was the marriage of their daughter Harriet to celebrated Chicago criminal lawyer Augustus Van Buren. Dr. Groesbeck died on November

25, 1884, having never retired despite being afflicted with progressive blindness. As Andreas notes, "Notwithstanding this great deprivation, he was, like John Milton, cheerful and contented, and universally beloved by everyone who had an opportunity of observing his comprehensive and contented mind subdue and beatify his physical disability."

Just as in the older cities of the Eastern seaboard, in early Chicago, law and medicine were the most prestigious professions. Lawyers, whose legal skills were needed for the conduct of business and politics, perhaps enjoyed more stature than physicians. Many doctors, nonetheless, belonged to the upper echelons of society. Some also showed surprising ingenuity in the embryonic economic structure of early Chicago. John T. Temple was just such an entrepreneur-physician. He was the first contractor to handle the U.S. mail out of Chicago and also operated a stagecoach line, and at the same time he served on the Board of Health and was a founder and trustee of Rush Medical College. Another to follow this diversified career path was Levi D. Boone (1808-1882), nephew of the renowned pioneer Kentuckian Daniel Boone. Born in Kentucky, married to the daughter of an eminent judge, and the father of eleven children, Boone enjoyed a large and lucrative practice in Chicago and was the first president of the Cook County Medical Society. However he relinquished his medical affiliations when he was elected the city's fourteenth mayor. Boone was a banker as well as a politician serving as president of the Merchants' and Mechanics' Bank in 1852. Both he and Dr. Temple participated with others in the assumption of a contract to build parts of the Illinois & Michigan Canal. Writing in 1885, Andreas noted of doctors that, "They became so thoroughly co-mingled with the interest of the city, aside from protecting and advancing her hygiene, and so prominent in all enterprises that had for their object her material benefit, that among the leaders in the city's progress will be found the names of our physicians."

One of the most esteemed doctors of Chicago's pioneer days was Daniel Brainard. Noted particularly for his surgical skill, he was also respected for his mastery of a collateral branch of medicine known as *materia medica* which requires a knowledge of how botany and geology affect medical remedies. Given his scholarly inclination he, along with Dr. Josiah C. Goodhue, drew up the incorporation papers for Rush Medical College in 1837, the same year Chicago was chartered as a city.

The first medical school in Illinois as well as the first west of Lexington and Cincinnati, this institution established Chicago as a major medical center, a reputation it enjoys to this day. Although the faculty of Rush had been severely reprimanded in 1852 by the Illinois Medical Society for allowing a woman, Dr. Emily Blackwell, to take a course of lectures, the medical community in Chicago was not so chauvinistic. Readily admitted into their ranks was Dr. Mary Harris Thompson who not only founded a hospital for women and children (1865) but also a medical college for women (1869). Other widely admired doctors of this era include James Van Zandt Blaney, Nathan Smith Davis, and Moses Gunn. The latter reputedly fulfilled all the requisites of a successful surgeon; that is, he had "the eye of a hawk, the hand of a woman, and the heart of a lion."

In 1858 Chicago had 158 physicians; by 1871 the number was up to 414. Neither was Chicago remiss in the construction of facilities to care for the sick. One of the earliest was the 1849 Illinois General Hospital of the Lake on the site of the barracks of old Fort Dearborn.

St. James's Hospital, opened in 1854 by the Episcopalians, was the first hospital of a Protestant denomination in Chicago. Roman Catholicism was represented by Mercy Hospital (1859), operated by the Sisters of Mercy, the Alexian Brothers Hospital (1866), and St. Joseph's Hospital under the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, opened in 1868. That same year a Jewish hospital was opened on the South Side. Cook County, the public charity hospital, was opened in 1866.

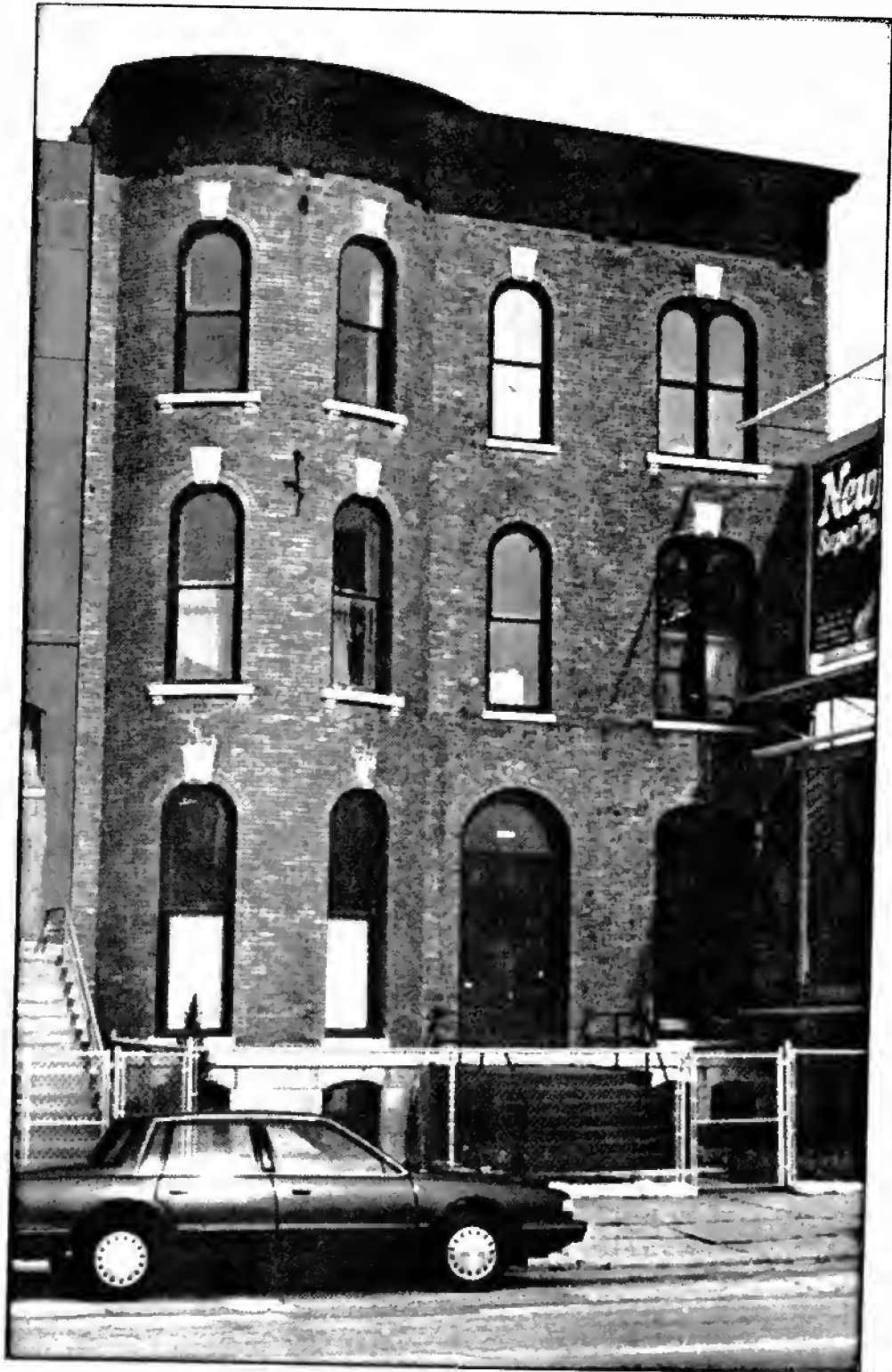
Despite all this seeming professionalism, medicine in the mid-nineteenth century was still a relatively primitive practice. Medical knowledge was so limited that many died of their doctors' attention. Even the educated, despairing of the efficacy of the conventional allopathic methodology, turned to the more unorthodox homeopathic system. A homeopath is a doctor who cured with minute doses of what in large amounts would induce the symptoms of the disease. Homeopathy which, as the saying goes, "offers a hair of the dog that bit you" enjoyed considerable popular support at the time. The Hahnemann Medical College, devoted to this branch of medicine, was established in Chicago in 1859.

In an era when Chicago had a fair number of legitimate doctors, the city still did a booming business in patent medicines. Chicago did have a factory producing a legitimate drug such as pearlash saleratus, today's simple sodium bicarbonate. But early Chicagoans, still not too far removed from the frontier, readily acknowledged the effectiveness of Indian cures by purchasing Old Sachem Bitters and Wigwam Tonic. Other of the multitudinous choices included Hamlin's Wizard Oil, Warner's Safe Kidney and Liver Cure, and Dr. King's New Discovery for Consumption. Each remedy usually purported to treat a wide range of ailments running the gamut from cancer to chapped hands. Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound sounded exceptionally benign but in actuality was mostly alcohol while others contained laudanum, morphine, and even cocaine, substances now classified as narcotics. In the half-century before the enactment of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, Chicagoans were as gullible as any other Americans. With small-town naivete, many women joined the Chicago Phrenological Society which studied the conformation of the skull as indicative of mental faculties and traits of character.

Chicago's Near West Side in the 1850s and 1860s

Abraham Groesbeck came to Chicago in 1856. He was in good company. That same year brought the pioneering department store magnate Marshall Field. The 1850s were a period of staggering growth for Chicago as countless new residents arrived. In two decades a military and Indian trading outpost had become literally a booming metropolis. When Chicago was incorporated in 1833, it was a swampy town of 350 people. By 1850, the population was 29,963; and in 1860, 109,263. As urban historian Frederic Cople Jaher recounts:

By the 1850s Chicago had become the largest primary grain, wheat, and lumber market in the country and was the railroad center of the West, and early in the Civil War it surpassed Cincinnati as the nation's premier meat-



The former residence of early Chicago physician Abraham Groesbeck is one of the city's premier examples of pre-fire residential design and a significant survivor of the fashionable residences that once lined the streets of the Near West Side in the mid-nineteenth century. *(Terry Tatum, photographer, for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)*

packing town. Chicago emerged as the colossus of the West because its hinterland contained the world's most productive agricultural area and because it was the terminus of the world's greatest internal waterway.

A flourishing economy brought prosperity to a number of Chicagoans. Many of those who could afford to do so chose to reside in commodious homes on the stylish Near West Side.

As early Chicagoan H. C. Chatfield-Taylor said, "One must truly be an old Chicagoan to recall the time when the shady streets which lie west of the river vied in social standing with any in the city." Writing in 1917, Chatfield-Taylor opined that these fine homes "evinced a courtliness and dignity quite lacking in the Lake Shore Drive palaces of modern millionaires." He also noted that the houses, "like the families that once inhabited them . . . antedate the Great Fire, a *sine qua non* of Chicago patricianship." Most remarkable of all, the Near West Side survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and its inhabitants would provide food, clothing, and shelter to those fleeing the holocaust. In fact, for six weeks after the Chicago Fire, the city government was housed in one of the Near West Side's most prominent institutions, the First Congregational Church (1870) at Washington Boulevard and Racine Avenue.

Emerging as a choice address in this area was Washington Boulevard (then simply Washington Street). Part of its attraction was its proximity to the center of the city. In 1933 Chicago newspaper journalist and historian Herma Clark created a correspondence between two ladies as a way of recounting early city history. The fictional Martha Freeman Esmond, writing to her friend Julia Boyd of New York, on June 5, 1874, describes making calls that afternoon on the Near West Side which she referred to as a "beautiful neighborhood . . . [which] has always been an aristocratic section of the city." She noted that, "Bishop Whitehouse lived very handsomely on that street and set a standard, I think, for everyone else." The Right Reverend Henry John Whitehouse was the second Episcopal Bishop of Illinois. A doctor of civil law as well as divinity, this scholarly and distinguished prelate was influential in church affairs as far away as England, Russia, and Sweden. His greatest work, according to Andreas, was the founding of the cathedral system in the United States.

The Esmonds made an initial call on Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Ross who lived just a block away from Dr. Groesbeck. There is no question that the two men knew each other, as in 1866 Abraham Groesbeck was president of the Chicago Medical Society and Joseph Ross was vice president. Martha described the Ross house as a "comfortable red brick, with a cupola and set in a large yard." She tells that they were lucky to find Dr. Ross at home as, "He is so constantly on the move, what with his large private practice and the tremendous amount of time he gives to his institutional work, Mrs. Ross says she doesn't see much of him." Reading the list of her husband's affiliations and activities makes Elizabeth King Ross's remarks ring very true. As well as professor of clinical medicine and diseases of the chest at Rush Medical College, Dr. Ross was the attending physician at the Reform School and the Orphan Asylum. He is credited as the originator and organizer of Cook County Hospital. During the Civil War, he was a physician on the battle field and an attending surgeon at Camp Douglas. A staunch Presbyterian, he worked during the 1880s to establish a hospital under the auspices of that

denomination. This institution was the progenitor of what is now Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's, one of Chicago's most substantial medical complexes.

Another well-known personage on Washington Boulevard was Abraham Lincoln's widow, Mary Todd Lincoln, who in 1866 purchased a residence at what is now 1238 West Washington Street. The John J. Glessners lived here until they moved to their now-famous H. H. Richardson-designed house on Prairie Avenue in 1885 (designated a Chicago Landmark in 1970). Other families of note on the street included the Richard T. Cranes and the T. M. Averys. Richard T. Crane, who came to Chicago from New Jersey in 1855 just a year before Dr. Groesbeck, was president of the Crane Brothers' Manufacturing Company. Trained as a brass and iron worker, Crane opened a small foundry in a corner of his uncle Martin Ryerson's lumber yard. Within a few decades he owned a company employing eleven hundred workers producing machinery and industrial equipment. Known for a highly reliable product, Crane was instrumental in the development of passenger and freight elevators. As a philanthropist, Richard T. Crane was active in the Chicago Relief and Aid Society as was T. M. Avery. Avery, by profession a vice president of the Equitable Insurance Company, was also a trustee of the Y.M.C.A., a member of the Board of Education, and a director of the Chamber of Commerce. Both men would be active in rebuilding Chicago after the Great Fire. Richard T. Crane, although by 1871 a highly successful business executive, nevertheless still had the hands-on experience to connect steam pumps to a still extant water supply at Adams Street during the conflagration.

The neighborhood is featured in the boyhood memories of Carter H. Harrison II. In his autobiography *Growing Up With Chicago*, published in 1944, he recalls:

Washington St. was the chosen scene for these races for it was the finest residential street of the west side. From the Episcopal cathedral at Green St. it was lined with handsome homes. The A. A. Carpenters lived in the centre of the block bounded by Washington, Randolph, Morgan and Carpenter streets; today the site is occupied by the National Biscuit Company. The William A. Egans and the Albert J. Snells were at Washington and Ada streets. . . . Farther along the street stood the homes of Frederick N. Hamlin, Dr. Abraham Groesbeck, Clark Lipe and Bishop Henry John Whitehouse . . .

The Harrisons were indisputedly one of Chicago's, indeed one of the country's, first families. Originally from Kentucky, their claim to a place in the nation's history included a signer of the Declaration of Independence, two United States presidents, and two Chicago mayors: both Carter Henry Harrison and his father gave at least a generation of public service to Chicago in their multiple terms as mayor. Harrison's boyhood home, located at the southwest corner of Ashland and Jackson, had been built by Henry H. Honore, one of the Near West Side's early pioneers. It would be Honore's son-in-law, the visionary real estate entrepreneur Potter Palmer, who masterminded the transformation of Lake Shore Drive into one of Chicago's most sought-after neighborhoods, thereby signaling the demise of the area of the city his father-in-

law had originally developed. The Harrisons and Honores, as well as the Samuel J. Walkers and others formed a contingent of Kentuckians on the Near West Side adding a certain Southern flavor and gentility to life there, so much so that for a time the Ashland Avenue area where they all lived was referred to as "Little Kentucky."

Dr. Abraham Groesbeck's House on Washington Boulevard

The simplicity of the Groesbeck House facade reflects the chaste New England traditions of Washington Boulevard's mid-nineteenth century residents, offering a stark contrast to the intricately detailed homes that were simultaneously being erected in other wealthy neighborhoods in the city. H. C. Chatfield-Taylor recalled that, "when the West Side was at its social zenith, the righteousness of New England was in the hearts of our foremost citizens." Although Chicago certainly counted among its population a large number of European immigrants, those native-born Americans who settled here most often came from the New England and Middle Atlantic States. Of Chicago's early elite, a preponderance hailed, like Dr. Groesbeck, from New York State.

Dr. Groesbeck's architect, whose name is not listed on currently available building records, chose to build his client's house in the Italianate mode, a style that dominated American domestic design between 1850 and 1870. The immense popularity of the Italianate resulted from its adaptability. With equal success it could be reflect either the unpretentious informality of an Italian rural vernacular farmhouse or villa or the structured sobriety of an Italian Renaissance palace. The Italianate had a close competitor in the Gothic Revival style, both coming to the fore in the 1830s. But by the 1860s the Italianate far outdistanced its rival which architectural historian Marcus Whiffen has aptly characterized as "the so much trickier Gothic," as it was more difficult to construct and more complex in its design and decoration.

Both the Italianate and Gothic Revival styles had begun in England as part of the Romantic Revival, also called the Picturesque movement. In the United States, the picturesque was thought to be a suitable, even desirable, alternative to the Greek Revival which gained precedence after the War of 1812 when the young republic, rejecting colonial ties, sought to use an architectural vocabulary appropriate for a functioning democracy. By the 1830s and 1840s, however, the romantic ideal of individual choice as applied to housing seemed even more democratic. Mid-century influential landscape architect and author Andrew Jackson Downing wrote, "A blind partiality for any one style in building is detrimental to the progress of improvement." The Italianate was eventually eclipsed by the Queen Anne which came into fashion in the late 1870s.

On the Abraham Groesbeck House, the tall arched door and window openings and projecting bracketed wood cornice acknowledge the then fashionable Italianate, but its unadorned planes of masonry clearly recall the understated elegance of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century New England architecture. The generous thirty-eight-foot lot allowed the designer of the Groesbeck House to create a wide, varied street facade, given interest by the combination of flat walls with a gently curved bay. With the house extending the full width



The elegant simplicity of the Abraham Groesbeck House derives from the sparseness of its ornamentation, restricted only to the black-painted rope molding of the window frames, plain angularly shaped slab keystones, and narrow sills of buff limestone. *(Terry Tatum, photographer, for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)*

of the lot, decorative treatment was confined to the street front only, conforming to the closely spaced row-house configuration of other houses in the area. Typical of Italianate houses of the period and other houses on Washington Boulevard, the main floor of the Groesbeck House was elevated above a raised basement, with the main entrance accessed from an exterior stair. On the street facade, the basement story was clad with simply detailed Joliet limestone, protecting the more vulnerable brick above from damage by ground water, while at the same time giving the overall composition a distinct visual base.

The red brick walls of the upper facade are an essay in austere sobriety, free of the applied pilasters, window hoods, string courses, carvings, and other decorative conventions which typify the majority of the Italianate residential designs of the period. Doors and windows are defined by tall punched openings in the masonry, emphasized only by the spare lines of the Joliet limestone single slab keystones and narrow sills. As the house had full exposure only on the front and rear facades, maximum window area was critical for natural illumination and ventilation of the interiors. Certainly the most characteristic motif of the Italianate is the fenestration with its long thin window shape framed by either U-shaped or segmentally arched tops. On the Groesbeck House, the first floor windows are more attenuated than those above. Ornamentation is meager, almost non-existent, restricted only to the painted black rope molding of the window frames. Even the design of the terminating wood cornice reflects a paring down of the often exuberantly treated cornices of the period, its elements being limited to a restrained profile, small dentils, and widely spaced paired brackets. The house is beautiful in its elemental plainness and an accurate reflection of its practical and unpretentious New England heritage.

The house documents not just an architectural style but a style of life as well. A still extant coach house on the rear of the property attests to the doctor's financial ability to afford current modes of transportation. As it was not uncommon then for a physician to conduct his practice out of his home, the arrangement of the first floor evidences the doctor's office quarters to the right of the main entrance. Rooms to the left follow the normal Victorian arrangement for private living and public entertainment. For a house over 120 years old, the Groesbeck residence is remarkably intact inside. Little altered is the spatial configuration of the rooms with their impressive ceiling heights and moldings. An original main staircase and four fireplaces also still remain.

Although the Near West Side enjoyed a brief resurgence in the years immediately after the Fire, as the century drew to a close many of the city's first families began to move to the newly prestigious Near North and South sides as the business center of the city began moving west of the river. Many of the Near West Side mansions were converted to rooming houses or adapted for commercial purposes. More were demolished in the early twentieth century to be replaced by industrial buildings. As one of the last of its kind to endure, the Abraham Groesbeck House is a venerable dwelling, a relic of an era long gone by when the Near West Side prevailed as the city's most exclusive residential enclave. Further it documents the profession of medicine in the mid-nineteenth century as practiced by one of Chicago's most eminent and respected members of that important calling.

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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